

HISTORYPODCAST

Taking History off the page
and putting it

ON AIR

Episode #1

The Only Atomic Bomb Ever Dropped on America

Hello and welcome to the first History Podcast. Before I start I would like to thank Robert Packett for not only inspiring me to start a podcast but for giving me a subject to podcast about. He is doing a wonderful job with his podcast called History According to Bob. I encourage anyone who is interested in History

to subscribe to his podcast. His website is located at summa-histoica.com.

While Bob is a history teacher, I am not. But like Bob I do have a passion for

history. I invite comments to each podcast and if relevant I will post them on historypodcast.blogspot.com



One of Bob's subjects on a recent podcast was Mars Bluff. I had never heard of this event before Bob's podcast. It was when the United States Air Force accidentally dropped a 30 kiloton nuclear atomic bomb on the small rural area of Southern Carolina.

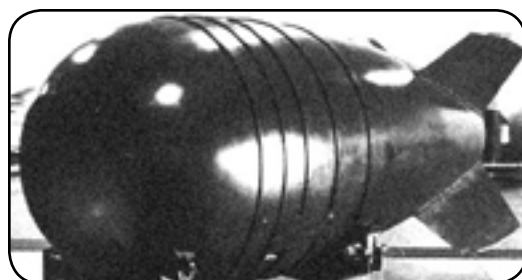
This is an actual event that occurred on March 11, 1958. This is the era of the Cold War. At precisely 4:19 PM a B-47E medium bomber serial number 53-1876A accidentally released their atomic bomb over the Gregg family property in Mars Bluff, South Carolina. The event of a bomb being lost by the military is apparently so commonplace it has a code name. The 1996 film of the same name popularized the term, "broken arrow", directed by John Woo, starring John Travolta and Christian Slater. This event also as the prestige of being the only nuclear bomb ever dropped on America.

That morning at the Hunter Air Force Base in Savannah the crew, Captain Earl Koehler, pilot; Captain

Charles Woodruff, co-pilot; Captain Bruce Kulka, navigator/bombardier were readying their plane for the coming mission called Operation Snow

Flurry. Snow Flurry was not a regular mission or training. It was part of the Unit Simulated Combat Mission and Special (or Nuclear) Weapons Exercise. Two generals had appeared at the briefing for this exercise 10 days ago to emphasize the important of the mission. The mission was to carry the bombs to Bruntingthorpe Air Base, England. Aircraft 53-1876A was to be accompanied by two other aircraft also carrying atomic bombs, all of the planes were part of the 375th Bombardment Squadron. (An Esquire article asserts that it was the 308th Bombardment Wing.)

There was to be a practice bomb run in England using a signal that would be transmitted to the ground where computers could calculate the accuracy of the bombing. Points would be awarded to the team with the most accurate bombing. In the morning a specialized two-man crew took just over an hour to load Aircraft 53-1876A. This two-man crew had trouble setting the steel locking pin in place. The specialized crew calls over the supervisor for help engaging the pin. The supervisor has the bomb lifted so the pin can be put in place with the aid of a hammer. The crew then proceeded through their pre-flight check in a hurry.



If they did not finish by 10:30 they would be docked points for this mission. Be-

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cause of the hurry no one bothered to check the release mechanism of the steel-pin.

For some reason the policy of the Air Force was the release the pin before take off in case it needed to be dropped. And then at 5,000 feet the pin was to be re-inserted until the time came to drop it.

When aircraft 53-1876A took-off they released the pin as per Air Force policy. Then once they had reached 5,000 feet the co-pilot reached down and pulled the lever that would re-insert the pin. The lever failed and the pilot's instrumentation notified them that the pin was not set properly.

As the bombardier Bruce Kukla's job was to help find targets and destroy them. As the person responsible for the bomb, Kukla was instructed by the pilot to go back there and figure out what is wrong. Because the bomb bay compartment is not pressurized the entire plane had to be depressurized and the whole crew had to go on oxygen.

The space in the plane where the bomb is stored is very tight. In fact, it was so small a space Kukla could not wear a parachute back there. The 7,600 pound bomb with dimensions of 10 feet, 8 inches long and 61 inches in diameter was just about as large as the inside of the B-47E. Kukla had to blindly reach up and try to re-insert the pin. Now remember, this place is cramped, Kukla can't even see what he is doing and he is hauling around an oxygen tank. Turns out that instead of the pin Kukla grabs the emergency-release lever. The bomb drops onto the bomb bay doors with Kukla on top of the bomb. The co-pilot would later remark, "I wouldn't even try to imagine what he was feeling in those seconds." With the combined weight of Kukla and the bomb, the doors give way and the bomb and Kukla begin to drop. Having better luck now Kukla manages to grab onto something and stop his fall towards Earth.

After, pulling himself back into the plane Kukla notifies the pilot of what has transpired. As per Air Force regulations, the pilot has a special code to transmit back to base in this case of an accidental drop. Because the procedure had never been used the operations center at Hunter Air Force Base did not recognize the coded transmission. As a final resort the pilot

was forced to radio into Florence airport, six miles from Mars Bluff, and ask them to telephone Hunter and notify them that Aircraft 35-1876A had lost a "device".

Meanwhile, on the ground at the Gregg Family property. The bomb was impacting. The explosion was not a full nuclear explosion. Thankfully, Air Force policy is such that at peacetime, the fissionable nuclear core of the weapon is to be stored elsewhere in the aircraft, in what is called a "birdcage". The explosion injured all five members of the Walter Gregg family and destroyed practically everything standing. Mrs. Gregg was sewing on the front porch; her son and husband were in the tool shed. The two Gregg girls were 65 feet from where the bomb struck, playing with their cousin Ella Davis at the playhouse their father had constructed for them. Ella was to receive 31 stitches and was the only one who had to stay overnight at the Florence hospital. That evening at the hospital was when Walter Gregg learned that the explosion was from an Air Force bomb.

Where the heck is Mars Bluff. Don't feel bad you're not the only person who has never heard of it. It has no post office and the United States Postal Service website has no zip code for it. However, some have found the crater of 50-70 feet in diameter and 25-30 feet deep. There is an article at Tybee Bomb.com that has a picture and instructions to the crater. The link is in the show notes on historypodcast.blogspot.com. The saying it is a small world goes to extremes with this next tidbit of information. It turns out that another cousin of Walter Gregg, Amelia Wallace Vernon published a book in 1993 called, African American at Mars Bluff, South Carolina. The book documents the cultivation of rice by slaves in Mars Bluff. Interestingly enough many of the rice fields she mentions in the book come very close to the crater.

The Air Force offered the Gregg Family \$44,000 for damages. This amount came nowhere close to what the damages actually were. The Air Force sent a senior legal officer to figure out this amount. He didn't even give the Gregg's a housing allowance while their home was being re-built. The values that the senior legal officer gave all the damaged goods was the depreciation value not the replacement value. Another interesting tidbit, the Gregg's owned free-range chick-

ens. Free-range means the chickens are not in a coope but roam around the property. Several of the chickens where vaporized upon the bomb impact. Therefore, the Air Force would not settle on an exact number of chickens destroyed. So, the official record reads 6-14 chickens may have been lost.

The Gregg's received a special private bill signed by President Eisenhower to sue the U.S. Government. Which they promptly did. After three years in court they received \$54,000 of which they now had to pay lawyer fees.

Kukla now resides in Thailand and when visiting the states stays on the West Coast in a hotel. He does not respond to questions for an interview. The Air Force has changed the way the bombs go off. They no longer explode on impact, but only when a signal is transmitted to them. In a recent article from The State, a South Carolina newspaper, Clyde Gregg, nephew of Walter Gregg says he is going to sell the supposed fragments from the bomb that fell on his Uncle's home 47 years ago. The link to this story is also in the show notes. The crater is still there today. It is behind a new housing development called Francis Marion Forest. About 100 feet off Lucius Circle you can see the crater, a link is in the show notes. Also, in the show notes is a link to a news brief video on vce.com. If you are interested in learning more, I highly recommend reading the American Heritage and the Esquire article.

Thank you for listening to this first show of historypodcast. I hope you subscribe. Details about this show are on the website at historypodcast.blogspot.com. The full script for this show is available. You can email me at historypodcast@gmail.com. Suggestions and comments are encouraged.

Special Thanks To

History According to Bob
The Orange County Library System
The State, South Carolina Online Newspaper
Esquire Magazine
American Heritage Magazine
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Works Cited

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A Perfectly Understandable Mistake

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